Presenting a "Career-Life Balance" Approach to the Work-Life Balance Issue

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The effective management of employees' work-life balance (WLB) requires organisations to recognise and account for the array of work and non-work roles that impact their employees' working-lives. Despite the literary attention given to the 'work-life balance' in recent years, however, contemporary researchers still note the concept's inadequacy both in terms of its definition and administration. Research suggests that in order to manage the WLB effectively, human resource managers should consider better representing the employees' perspective in their management of the WLB. This paper attempts to facilitate this through the conceptualisation of a Career-Life Balance Impact Audit. Such an audit would provide employees with an avenue to express their WLB needs and career aspirations formally with their employer, and provide a firm with a potentially powerful basis upon which to implement their job evaluation/design and performance management processes. Word Count: 4433

1. Introduction

In Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, factors such as the 'tightening' of skilled labour markets, globalisation's impact on 'normal working hours', and changes to the demographic makeup of the labour force have each represented strategic challenges to which organisations and employees have had to respond (Ammons and Edgell, 2007; Doherty, 2004; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Nickson, Warhurst, Lockyer and Dutton, 2004). The resultant organisational pursuit of increased responsiveness, productivity, innovative capacity and flexibility has been a defining characteristic of the 'Work-Life Balance' (WLB) movement of the past 20 years (Estes, 2004; Higgins and Duxbury, 2005; Howard, D'Onofrio and Boles, 2004). There is recognition (by both academics and practitioners alike) that an integrated set of flexible HRM policies has the potential to significantly impact employee satisfaction, firm productivity and the development of sustainable competitive advantages (see Forsyth and Polzer-Debruyne, 2007; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Despite the extensive literary attention given to the WLB since the 1980s (and best efforts to implement it in the workplace), contemporary research continues to note the concept's inadequacy, both in terms of its definition and administration (Hyman and Summers, 2004; Lewis, Rapoport and Gambles, 2003; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). This paper explores the apparent disconnect between the WLB concept and current HRM practices, and presents the basis for a strategic HRM audit process to reconcile it.

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2. Literature Review

A review of the HRM literature indicates that the inadequacies observed in the WLB discipline can be attributed to two main factors. The first relates to the focus of much of the WLB literature, which has tended to emphasise the work-family interface and traditional nuclear family structure as the most important units of analysis (Wickham and Parker, 2007). Elloy and Smith (2004) and Spinks (2004) both highlight the literature's inadequacy in recognising the complete array of responsibilities that employees wish to enact in their non-working hours. Perhaps more importantly, the literature fails to account for the manner in which their inability to enact non-work responsibilities impacts on the employees' motivation, satisfaction and overall ability to enact their work-based roles (Wickham and Parker, 2007).

The second factor relates to the WLB literature's almost exclusive emphasis on the 'unitary' perspective of human resource management, that is, the assumption that WLB policy regimes exist with the primary aim to maximise employees' availability and time spent at work (Shorthose, 2004; Wise and Bond, 2003). Research by Dex and Smith (2002) and Kiger (2005) provide perhaps the most damning evidence against current WLB policy implementation when they revealed that less than two per cent of employees actually participate in available WLB programs. Dex and Smith (2002) cite two main causes for this poor level of participation. The first relates to perceptions of equity, with many employees reporting that they did not wish to appear a 'special case' or to require 'special treatment' to their colleagues. The second is that the wide range of policies adopted by organisations has been based on an ill-informed conceptualisation of what constitutes a 'valuable WLB offering', and that this has led to its ineffective formalisation in HRM practices.

Brennan (2007) provides an important insight in to the development of these issues since the conceptualisation and implementation of WLB policies in the early 1980s. Fundamentally, she argues, the WLB system represents an ongoing series of tactical responses to major productivity issues facing the government and business sector leaders of the day. For instance, throughout the early 1980s, the need to accommodate the needs of an increasing number of married women in the labour market, substantial WLB "gains" were made with the introduction of child-care options, maternity-leave and part-time working arrangements. As both government and business became aware of other family-structures outside of the assumed 'nuclear' structure in the 1990s, other accommodations were made for indigenous, ethnic and religious differences in the workplace (Brett, 2003). Brennan (2007: 33) reflects upon the historic management of the WLB as a series of tactics that tended to "push and pull in different directions" depending on the productivity issue of the day, with almost no regard for the important 'medium to long-term career needs' of the employee.

Recognition of the fundamental issues within the WLB concept, along with a desire to redress them through a more strategic theory and policy perspective, has emerged from agreement that "there is a clear connection between the way people are managed and firm performance" (Purcell, 2002:1). In order to address the fundamental issues, we adopt the perspective of Elloy and Smith (2003: 63) who suggest that an effective conceptualisation and management of the WLB requires a fundamental shift from current practice towards:

>…an holistic approach to human resource management, which implies a greater awareness of the total context of worker's daily lives, not just those hours they spend at work.

Claus (2007: 9) supports this assessment, asserting that "successful managers… recognise and support their employees as 'whole people', and they continually [need to] experiment with the way work is done". Guest (1997; 2002) suggests that to integrate the WLB literature with the holistic SHRM approach, their design and implementation needs to understand and accommodate more explicitly the needs and perspectives of the employee. Lewinson (2006) goes further to state that employees themselves must take responsibility for their career development, raise issues/concerns, and be willing to set work and life goals with their employer in such ways that their progress towards them can be measured as objectively as possible. As employees are now loyal to their career rather than their work (employer) (O'Donohue, Donohoe and Grimmer, 2007) we are adopting a Career Life Balance approach (CLB) to reflect better the realities of employees' perspectives. CLB covers three aspects of balance: time, involvement and satisfaction (Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003).

Without a commitment from both parties to the employment relationship, the achievement of an effective and sustainable WLB regime becomes increasingly unlikely (Hobson *et al.* 2004; Stum, 1999). Addressing these calls, this paper seeks to explore two important issues; firstly, to provide a finer grained understanding of the disconnect between HRM practice and WLB policy development as perceived by HR practitioners charged with managing it in the workplace. Secondly, it seeks to use these reflections to set the groundwork for a 'Career-Life Balance Audit' that enables organisations to understand and incorporate business and employee needs into an effective WLB policy development process.

3. Method

In order to explore this opportunity, this research comprised a series of semi-structured interviews with human resource management professionals. Each participant was selected for an interview on the basis that they possessed a minimum of 10 years experience in an HR management role. In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview questions posed to the participants were derived from an extensive review of the WLB literature and empirical evidence from business/HR periodicals. These questions were designed to cover the necessary issues, but were framed in an open-ended manner, to allow the interviewees sufficient latitude for introspection and open reporting of their own perspectives. As a result, the informants were free to pursue those matters that they considered important.

The collection of primary data using a semi-structured interview method allowed the informants to tell their own story in their own way, thereby allowing the researcher direct access to the experience of the case (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). The semi-structured interviews assisted this inquiry in each of these areas, as they enabled the researcher to access facets of the case that would not have been available by any other data gathering technique. The interpretations of the data, and

the verification of the conclusions, were facilitated by the use of the QSR NVIVO (version 7) software package. In the method literature, it has been emphasised that computer software programs such as NVIVO, are of significant value in qualitative analysis and any subsequent pattern matching and theory building (Kelle, 1995; Weitzman and Miles, 1995). The interview transcripts were imported into the NVIVO software database, following which the categories (i.e. the coding of the data) were established as a series of nodes.

4. Discussion

Consistent with the findings of Brennan (2007), the first round coding of the interview data revealed two important issues regarding the issues of effectively implementing WLB policies in the workplace. The first issue related to the low levels of 'employee commitment' that WLB policies have tended to generate in the workplace. The respondents in this study noted that WLB initiatives tended to fail due to the unintended and dysfunctional consequences that resulted from the firm's 'best WLB intentions':

> We found that 'Flex-Time' actually diminished our employees' perception of WLB. Our employees ended up accruing lots of unpaid over-time because there is so much work to be done, and no opportunity to take time off. From an HR point of view, this ended up being quite non-productive. Our people are tired, with no time to re-charge; they feel no pay-off for their continued hard work.

> One of my problems with some WLB policies is that they don't leverage affective commitment. They are simply paying people and giving them conditions so that they feel that they cannot afford to leave. What that means then is that they don't necessarily perform in the job. WLB policies which just retain them, but don't get them to perform more effectively in their job are, therefore, flawed.

> Some companies have put in WLB policies and at the end of the day nothing's improved. These policies can simply act as "golden handcuffs". Quite often people will use the offering because it's available, whether that actually improves their WLB is questionable. It comes back to that hours-based equation: If I've had reduced hours of work, but I still hate being at work, then there is no net benefit of the WLB program. Even if I get an extra week off a year, that leaves me with 47 weeks in an environment in which I don't feel engaged in.

The second issue common to HR practitioner's responses was the view that many current WLB policy development processes failed to deliver value to either party to the employment relationship. The respondent data consistently reported that it was *either* the needs of the business or the need of the employee that was served by the WLB policy development process, but rarely the needs of both:

> There were a couple of instances where the WLB policies were taken up, but then rejected by our employees. When I asked them

> about it, the general response was "I need the flexibility to do things for myself and my family – your expectation is that I can just do my work anytime, and pressure is brought to bear to do just that". In the end, our WLB initiatives were just not seen as useful or particularly friendly.

> My take on WLB is that it's not an 'hours-based equation' – but unfortunately that's exactly how senior management feel about it. A lot of WLB policies are driven by an inaccurate assessment of its role in driving the company forward. I think WLB is about getting employees engaged at work, enjoying it, being challenged, and making a difference.

All of the HR practitioners in this study reported concern with the lack of any significant linkage between WLB policy development process and the job design/job evaluation process functions of strategic HRM. Underpinning this concern is recognition that WLB policy development has tended to assume an equity mindset (i.e. minimising risk to the firm by 'treating people equally') in a context where equal treatment is actually not highly desired. Instead, the respondents reported a need for HR to provide equitable treatment that more closely equates with the principles of distributive justice than those of risk minimisation:

> People say that employees are their most valuable asset, yet HR managers have dished up crap after crap over the years. HR should be about providing business solutions, but it has focused on risk reduction, and as a result there has been a real lack of clarity about what HR needs to deliver. In the end, HR has come up with wishy washy ideas that try to please everybody instead of actually trying to create solutions for people.

> People want to talk about the personal aspects of their job. People want to be treated equally, but differently, in response to their personal circumstances. You need to show some empathy thinking in terms of almost pre-empting needs and results that are going to occur, rather than simply reacting and saying "well this is what the policy says so just do it".

The respondents were also asked what measures they would put in place to improve their management of the WLB issue. The first round coding of the data revealed two strategies that the HR professionals felt were needed to align the strategic principles of HRM with the management of the WLB. The first was the need for agreed set of WLB performance measures and an integration of these measures into the job design and job evaluation tasks of the HR manager:

> Only when we can determine how jobs can be made WLB friendly can we hope to figure out what specific WLB policies might be useful. For too long HR has failed to include WLB considerations to the level of detail needed to be meaningful.
> I don't think the work-life balance is the end. It is a strategy you might adopt to try and achieve a business goal. Quite clearly we are trying

> to achieve more effective business. To do this we need to retain skills and knowledge for longer periods of time. WLB is a strategy to adopt to try and influence people's commitment to an organisation… and to allow them to effectively manage some of the previous unrealistic demands put on by some companies on some people in the name of a 'flawed business model' of how you can be effective.

The second was the necessity to conceptualise WLB policy's role in optimising employee productivity, and not simply to make their non-work responsibilities easier to accommodate. Part of this was the need to develop WLB policies with the needs of both the firm and employee in mind (and in that order of importance):

> We need to monitor what we offer, how it's being used, what the outcomes of this are. Also, benchmarking industry competitors and other local firms as well would be useful in seeing where we are located competitively. We need to see what others are doing.

> We've had to pre-empt a lot of things in advance. When you give them flexibility, they want flexibility within flexibility. I need to be able to leave early, and then earlier, and so on. As long as you've put in your expectations of how that will be managed, you need a number of contingencies to every plan now.

> We must always remember there are business requirements to be met. Some roles just can't be done flexibly, either time or location wise. But always something else that can be done instead. Working from home with children didn't work for [name deleted], her work performance suffered because the location was convenient but not productive.

The first-round coding of respondent data, therefore, highlights four important implications for the effective development of WLB policies. The first is the need for HR managers to appreciate (as fully as possible) the array of consequences and employee behaviours that their WLB policies will drive. The second is the need to create a WLB value proposition for both the business and its employees – one that serves the strategic intent of the firm by optimising employee productivity as well as enables the employee to fulfil what they believe are their important non-work responsibilities. The third is consensus that the development of WLB policies must be strategically linked to the full range of HR functions, and not simply 'added-on' in an ad-hoc reaction to address employee crises. Lastly, that there is recognition of the importance that justice plays in the development of WLB policies.

5. Conclusion

In order to accommodate the four criteria emanating from our primary data analysis, we feel that the development of an alternative strategic HRM (SHRM) audit system is required to reconcile the productivity needs of the business and the career needs of the employee. Consistent with the call by Elloy and Smith (2003), we feel that the consideration of how the employee conceptualises their career development, as opposed to merely accommodating their current job tasks, provides a sound basis

for the strategic management of the WLB. Such an approach would provide an holistic lens through which to identify the barriers and perceived disincentives for both employers and employees to embrace WLB options. To achieve this, we feel that there needs to be a clear conceptualisation of an organisation's HR framework to provide a rigorous basis on which to identify the effectiveness of its WLB initiatives. Drawing on the strategic HR literature, and, in particular the work of Guest (1987, 1997 and 2002), Ulrich (1997), and Boxall and Purcell (2003), we suggest using a 'career-life balance (CLB) audit' framework that includes three distinct levels of analysis. Firstly, we feel that a CLB audit process would require the effective integration of HRM policies with the organisation's strategy, culture, WLB approach, and the employee's need to manage their 'career' aspirations – which we argue would include an emphasis on the family unit. Such recognition requires the firm to understand the employee's career needs, and the manner in which WLB initiatives might best serve to satisfy them.

Secondly, that there needs to be an ability to gauge whether a firm's HR policies are internally consistent and result in positive impacts on employee engagement, flexibility, productivity and retention. In this way, we feel that a CLB audit system would need to integrate the career needs of part-time employees and those that have had extended career-breaks. A CLB audit, therefore, would need to look beyond accommodating only 'full-time employees' and require WLB initiatives to include those people working in non-traditional forms of employment. Thirdly, the CLB audit must be able to objectively measure employee perceptions and adoption rates of WLB policies. Given the theoretical framework, we propose that a CLB audit focus on linking the HR functions of job design, realistic job preview and performance management in a new way: namely on the basis of their 'career relevance', 'productivity' and 'cost effectiveness'. The results of the audit would provide key data on ways the firm could increase the usage and effectiveness of WLB policies resulting in increases in productivity and employee attachment and retention.

Job design is important as it includes elements of both job content (quantity, quality, variety, level of job satisfaction) and job context (autonomy/flexibility, managerial style, team/co-workers and firm culture (particularly around perceived requirements for "face time" and to be available outside work hours). If the design of a position (in regard to the 'job size', the 'level of intensity' and the 'extent to which the job impacts on non-work time') discourages WLB or makes it difficult for the employee to achieve desired outcomes, then WLB initiatives are unlikely to be adopted. A realistic job preview is a key component of the selection process as it enables the organisation to be very explicit about the extent to which each firm position impacts on the incumbent's non-work roles and enabling further negotiation or allowing prospective employees to self-select out of the selection process.

Being able to audit the firm's performance management against WLB issues provides two additional outcomes. Firstly, to gauge the extent managers facilitate employees' WLB (because if such considerations were part of a manager's performance assessment, it would encourage supportive behaviour), and secondly information would be obtained on the impact of the WLB initiatives on the capacity of employees to achieve their individual goals. In particular, a CLB audit would likely suggest that "…if performance were evaluated more on output than input (that is,

face-time), then workers would have more control over when they did their work" (Barnett, 1999: 154). Consistent with the SHRM framework outlined, a CLB audit would source information at the strategy, culture, HR policy and operational levels of the organisation. The focus of the CLB audit would be on actions and behaviours rather than a compliance audit of policy and procedures; it would obtain feedback from employees about their experiences, needs and expectations. Outcomes of the CLB audit would provide valuable information that would extend beyond the scope of CLB, and would assist the HR function to demonstrate its strategic value to the firm and provide support for the organisation in developing and marketing its employer brand.

6. References

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